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ABSTRACT

This brochure explains the benefits and challenges of community learning centers, lists some examples of specific school-community alliances, offers suggestions for promoting school-community partnerships, and provides sources for more information. School- community alliances highlighted involve public schools teaming with public libraries, social service agencies, recreation departments, universities, and businesses. (Contains 10 references.) (GR)

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Chances are that, when you were growing up, your school's clubs, sports, and social activities played an important role in your life and in the life of your community. Today, in addition to hosting traditional student clubs and activities, many schools are open from morning to night hosting daycare, prekindergarten, adult, and senior learning programs as well as communitywide educational, health, social, cultural, religious, and recreational services and events. Schools used for these purposes can be referred to as community learning centers. (Other ways of expressing this concept include "full-service schools," "shared facilities," and "schools as centers of community.") This brochure explains the benefits and challenges of community learning centers, lists some examples of specific school-community alliances, offers suggestions for promoting school-community partnerships, and provides sources for more information.

What Are the Benefits?

Students, parents, and the entire community can benefit from a community learning center. Serving a broad spectrum of the community brings a better return on the community's investment in its school facilities and generates a wide range of citizen and business support for school financing. School-community alliances take a great deal of planning, cooperation, and flexibility on behalf of everyone involved, but they can result in enhanced learning, strengthened community ties, and reduced facility costs.

Community Use of Schools: Facility Design Perspectives (Fanning/Howey Associates, Inc., 1995) provides numerous examples of schools that have accommodated community use. The following testimonials are from some of the people involved with these schools:

- "The more people use our schools, the more they associate with us, identify with us, and use our services and facilities, the better chance we have for enlisting the community's support when we need it." *Dr. C. Douglas Parks, Superintendent of the Aptakisic-Tripp Community Consolidated School District No. 102 in Buffalo Grove, Illinois.*

- "Wilson Middle School will be heavily used by our community. We knew we wanted to be able to accommodate a lot of use, so we had two main objectives: organize the functions so that the academic wing can be closed off and people can easily come and go in the public spaces; and make sure the spaces are easy to maintain, durable, and can be cleaned up quickly." *Bill Reiter, Director of Facilities and Operations for Muncie Community Schools in Muncie, Indiana.*

- "The older community members like to have a place to get together and talk that is safe. The school is a safe place. So they gather at the school and chat and have all sorts of social activities." *Dr. Betty J. Davis, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Management of the Pontiac School District in Pontiac, Michigan.*

- "Our school is the cultural center for our village—a museum, a library, and a place where our children can learn about their heritage. . . . Community use really helps with increasing support for our facilities. Our curriculum is based on community sharing and involvement." *Sam Towarak, Assistant Superintendent of the Bering Strait School District in Unalakleet, Alaska.*

What Are the Challenges?

Most challenges are associated with increased building use. Because school spaces will be shared more often, territorial and other issues must be managed skillfully. More staff time is needed for planning, scheduling, and supervision. Liability, parking, and school safety issues have to be addressed. Cleaning and maintenance are more costly, and wear and tear on buildings and equipment increases. But the same problems present themselves daily

in schools now, so these issues are nothing new. The cost of adding each new activity is usually quite low and sometimes can be recovered through user fees.

Some community members may not agree that school facilities should be used by private groups and organizations. This problem is best addressed by instituting clear and fair policies and user fees developed openly and with the community's input.

What Are Some Examples of School-Community Alliances?

School districts are forming alliances with public libraries, social service offices, community recreation departments, corporate training facilities, and similar entities to put their activities under the same roof with schools. Some districts have taken school activities out of the school building altogether and distributed them among specialized "learning environments" within the community with excellent results. The famous Zoo School outside of Minneapolis, Minnesota, for instance, is actually located in the state zoo.

The following are examples of specific school-community alliances:

- **Public libraries and public schools.** Wisconsin has implemented a program in some communities whereby school and public library resources are housed in the same building, and services are provided by the same staff.
- **Social service agencies and public schools.** The Children's Aid Society in New York City has implemented a community school model by using the school building to link parents and children to comprehensive social services, including afterschool care, dental services, and mental health counseling.
- **Recreation departments and public schools.** The school system in Clayton, Missouri, and the city of Clayton combined plans and resources to upgrade the high school athletic facility. The high school now has a new athletic facility that the city can use as a new community center. In St. Paul, Minnesota, a charter school shares space with a city recreation building that was formerly used primarily after school and on weekends.
- **Universities and public schools.** George Washington University in Washington, D.C., gives students at the School Without Walls High School access to its library and to 100 university classes per year to supplement the public school's offerings. In return, the university uses the school's building for evening classes. In Arizona, two charter schools share space with a community college, thus allowing students to take both high school and college classes.
- **Businesses and public schools.** In the Birmingham Public School System in Michigan, an underused high school was transformed into a combination 1,000-student high school and a corporate training and conference center. This has provided the business community with an asset and the high school students with access to state-of-the-art technology. In other cities, businesses have provided onsite space for use by local schools.

What Can I Do To Promote Community Use of My Child's School?

If you have an idea about a new use for your child's school or for an innovative alliance between your child's school and another organization, talk to school and community leaders. Your idea could be anything from using school facilities for an afterschool care program to building a new auditorium for joint school and community use or even starting a school in a zoo!

Implementing your idea can involve a few hours of work or years of fund-raising. The following are some specific steps you can take to promote community use of your child's school:

- Meet with legislators, city and county officials, and other elected leaders to request their support in promoting the use of local schools as community learning centers.
- Serve on an advisory or building committee, or pass along your ideas to members of the committee.
- Attend public hearings.
- Seek opportunities to encourage community use of your child's school. For example, you can speak at meetings or other community gathering places and provide examples of successful community learning centers.
- Participate in community forums, planning workshops, and design sessions for new schools.
- Publish articles on community use of schools in your community's newsletters.

Where Can I Get More Information?

The following organizations offer information on the topic of using schools as community learning centers:

National Center for Community Education
1017 Avon Street
Flint, MI 48503
Toll Free: 800-811-1105
Phone: 810-238-0463
Fax: 810-238-9211
E-mail: ncce@nccenet.org
Web: http://www.nccenet.org

National Community Education Association
3929 Old Lee Highway, #91-A
Fairfax, VA 22042
Phone: 703-359-8973
Fax: 703-359-0972
E-mail: ncea@ncea.com
Web: http://www.ncea.com

U.S. Department of Education
21st Century Community Learning Centers
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202-6175
Phone: 202-260-0919
Fax: 202-260-3420
E-mail: 21stCCLC@ed.gov
Web: http://www.ed.gov/21stcclc

Sources

References identified with ED are documents abstracted in the ERIC database. They are available in library microfiche collections; paper copies and, in some cases, electronic copies can be purchased from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service at 1-800-443-3742. Call 1-800-LET-ERIC (538-3742) for more details.

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This and other Parent Brochures are available online on the ERIC systemwide Web site (http://www.accesseric.org/resources/parent/parent.html). You can call ACCESS ERIC at 1–800–LET–ERIC (538–3742) for additional free printed copies of this brochure while supplies last.

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